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Dear Colleagues

OUTCOME OF LATEST REVIEW OF “VISITING WITH CARE – A PATHWAY”

In line with the agreed approach to managing a return to more normalised visiting arrangements outlined in “**Visiting With Care – A Pathway**”, colleagues in the Public Health Agency have recently completed their latest formal review of the data available.

In summary, surveillance information reflecting the current impact of COVID-19 on Care Homes shows:

- **Outbreaks:**

- The incidence of new care home outbreaks per week has been relatively steady over the last 8 weeks averaging just under 10 new outbreaks per week.

- **Community Incidence**

- The current wave of COVID-19 has seen sustained high levels of community prevalence with frequent fluctuations creating a seesaw

effect over the last four months. No downward trend has yet been established.

- Seven day rolling average of 1,111 noted on 30th October (max 1,679 on 20 August – min 1,073 on 28 Sept).
- Although slightly reduced from the last report, the highest number of individuals with positive test per 100K population continues to be in the 10-14 age group (1,107 females, 905 males per 100k) accounting for 16% of positive tests across the population in last 7 days from 2nd November. Higher rates in the 35-50 year old age groups may also indicated increased household transmission from children to parents.

- **Mortality associated with COVID-19 in care home settings:**

- There are continued low levels of mortality associated with COVID-19 in care home settings. There were four care home deaths associated with COVID-19 during the week to 22nd October 2021. Care home deaths as a proportion of total deaths where COVID-19 is noted on the death certificate remains significantly lower than in all previous waves. (NISRA).

- **Hospital admissions :**

- Hospital admissions remain a challenge for the system. Overall, admissions to hospital due to COVID-19 has largely mirrored the ups and downs of wider community prevalence in recent weeks. Current general bed occupancy is just over 100%.
- The majority of inpatients are from older populations with 56% of inpatients being aged 70 years and over (steady from last month).

- **Vaccine uptake rates:**

- Vaccination remains steady from last month; for residents with 2 doses = 91.6%; for staff with 2 doses = 80.2%. Variation in care home staff vaccination at trust level is reducing. A small number of homes still have low levels of coverage (especially in staff). Many of the homes with low uptake rates are either very small or have a relatively high turnover of residents as they provide respite or intermediate care. Ongoing efforts are in place to improve data quality.
- Increased numbers of positive cases have been noted in vaccinated residents – indicating possible waning protection.
- Information on booster uptake not yet available. Anecdotal feedback from Trusts indicates poor uptake in some areas (WHSCT and SHSCT in particular). Ongoing efforts to increase uptake.

- **Variant of concern:**

- The delta variant continues to be the dominant variant in Northern Ireland with observed increased transmissibility but remains sensitive to the vaccine.
- Waning protection from vaccination is a concern but expected to be offset by a booster (3rd dose) being offered to selected populations (including care home residents and staff). Health protection surveillance will continue to monitor this data closely.

Based on the above surveillance information, I can confirm that the Public Health advice is that we should remain at the second full stage of the Pathway – “**Gradual Easing**”. This is because the overall community risk from COVID-19 has stayed relatively constant in the absence of significant data to indicate impact has dropped significantly; so there remain areas of caution, including

the high incidence of COVID-19 in children and young people, their collective lack of vaccination (to date) and higher risk of asymptomatic spread.

The next 4-weekly review will be completed in early December and we expect to be able to issue a further update shortly thereafter. We have also been working to develop some additional recommendations to cover the Christmas period and expect those to be issued shortly.

Finally, since the effectiveness of COVID-19 vaccines and vaccine coverage is apparent at this stage in reducing the severity of COVID-19 infections and the risk of hospitalisation, I would again highlight the importance of care home managers and Trusts further encouraging uptake of the COVID-19 vaccination for care home staff and continued engagement with the regular testing programmes for staff and visitors.

I would ask that this update be circulated appropriately to facilities, residents/families and staff as soon as possible. Thank you all, once again, for the efforts you continue to make to deliver top quality care in these difficult times.

Yours sincerely



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